Over the course of three centuries, the spatial outlook of Ming China (1368–1644) underwent a drastic change that probably few historical empires have experienced. Founded by the peasant emperor Zhu Yuanzhang (1328–98; aka Ming Taizu or the Hongwu emperor), the Ming dynasty began as an agrarian state, conceived and institutionalized around the ideal of self-governing rural communities. Yet by the close of the dynasty, cities had impinged on the everyday reality of Chinese life. Through extensive urban networks, even staple grains and commercial crops such as cotton were integrated into empire-wide long-distance trade. For those in the succeeding dynasty, the Ming would be remembered for its urban glamour and material decadence. For historians today, the transition from an empire of villages to one of cities, though fraught with conflicts and confusion, marks the triumph of commercial power that defied and eventually prevailed over the oppressive grip of the state. The ascendency of economic forces, however, is only one side of the radical transformation of the Ming empire. Equally important, albeit less dramatic, are the concurrent institutional reforms and cultural negotiations that bridged and reconciled the early Ming rural ideal and late Ming urbanization. After all, commerce could not have transformed Ming China without accommodations that enabled the dated imperial infrastructure to continue to function and that rendered disruptive social change meaningful. Many urban historical studies have illumined the rich economic, cultural, and social life of late Ming towns and cities. Few, however, have focused on the corresponding changes in state regulations and cultural interpretations of cities prompted by the growing influence of cities. This book is a study of urbanization that explores how the expanding roles and functions of cities led the idea of city to be re-invented, contested, and reconceived in the late Ming empire.

I approach this macro-transformation from a micro-perspective, using four case studies from a particular city—Nanjing—as entry points.
to observe changes in it as a walled community, as a metropolitan area, as an imagined space, and, finally, as a discursive subject. This vantage point allows us to see what was at stake for the urbanites during the transition. The unraveling of their endeavors further brings to the fore the centrality of urban space in the process. Most interestingly, although we might expect Nanjing residents to be drawn to issues such as street plans and the built environment essential to the workings of urban life, the concerns of locals extended far beyond the physicality of urban space. In each case study, we find great social efforts to negotiate the ways in which urban residents’ lived space was regulated by state institutions and rendered through cultural works. The active involvement of Nanjing residents created a unique moment in Chinese history when urban space was not only a geographic location but also a point of social contention, open to political negotiation and cultural creation—a development that constitutes the core of this book.

Located in the northwestern corner of the lower Yangzi delta, Nanjing, literally the “Southern Capital,” served as the primary capital for the first half-century of the Ming dynasty (1368–1421). During this period, the city underwent significant physical expansion with population growing to over half a million. In many ways, Ming Nanjing was a product of a great political undertaking. Under the auspices of the founding emperor, Nanjing’s walled space was significantly expanded and its metropolitan area (Yingtian prefecture) restructured. The expansive reconstruction entailed massive labor conscription and forced immigration from throughout the empire to materialize Zhu Yuanzhang’s ideal capital, one that featured broad streets, grand palaces, and state-made residential quarters in service of government offices. This ideal vision for Nanjing was articulated in a series of printed urban plans the emperor personally and explicitly commissioned to provide an “imagined capital” for his subjects, most of whom would never see the grandeur of the capital in person. Political power, therefore, dominated not only the physical but also the imaginary cityscape of early Ming Nanjing.

The urban character of Nanjing, however, changed greatly in the following centuries. After a military coup d’état staged by a prince enfeoffed in northern China and his victory in the subsequent civil war at the beginning of the fifteenth century, the center of gravity of the imperium shifted to Beijing in 1421. Nanjing became a secondary capital,
its population was halved, and its economy declined. Yet with the general prosperity in the sixteenth century and the city’s prime location in Jiangnan, the most culturally and economically advanced area at the time, Nanjing revived as the Southern Metropolis (Nandu 南都). The transition from political capital to commercial metropolis was palpable in the city’s everyday life. The influx of sojourners and their housing needs fractured Zhu’s residential ward system and created a flourishing real estate market. Vendors encroached on the broad streets that had once been the pride of Nanjing, and the newcomers illegally occupied many government buildings. The collision between commercial power and Zhu Yuanzhang’s urban vision—a highly politicized, state-controlled space—transformed the cityscape of Nanjing, radically reshaping the lived space for urbanites.

The ramifications of this clash, however, extended far beyond the physical cityscape. As will be apparent from the four case studies, a distinctive social activism challenged the administration and conceptualization of urban space. In 1609, residents of Nanjing collectively volunteered tax information under one another’s supervision in order to realize their long-term demand for a tax reform (Chapter 1). This reform led to the creation of an urban property tax for the first time in this dynasty. The action of the urban community redefined the inhabited space in fiscal terms. Nor was this political activism bound by the walls of Nanjing; it resonated within the greater metropolitan area. A traditional Chinese city did not constitute a formal political unit. Rather, it served as the administrative center of a greater region. The name Nanjing, as was true of Suzhou or Yangzhou, also referred to the prefectural region, a mostly rural area governed from the metropolis through a group of lower-level walled cities. In this extended sense of Nanjing, urban space was physically marked by a system of city walls symbolizing the state presence in the area. Yet such official demarcation of urban space was visibly compromised in 1597, when a popular protest in one of Nanjing’s subordinate counties, Gaochun, dramatically overturned an imperial edict mandating construction of a city wall (Chapter 2).

In addition to political actions that challenged state-imposed definitions of urban space, there also appeared cultural products aimed at remolding the imagination and conception of the city. For instance, an illustrated guidebook, Jinling tuyong 金陵圖詠 (Illustrated odes on
A New Approach to Chinese Urbanism

Nanjing), depicts forty scenic spots and gives specific instructions on the ways the city was to be viewed (Chapter 3). This vision, as advocated by a group of native Nanjing elites, grew out of the cultural practice of landscape appreciation. It formed a stark contrast to the imperial vision of Zhu Yuanzhang. Not only was Nanjing being reimagined through visual projection, but the city was also becoming the subject of discourses at odds with the glorified accounts found in official local gazetteers. Two early seventeenth-century *ketan* (conversations with guests), for example, record conversations among urban elites about the city they inhabited (Chapter 4). Drawing largely on street news and gossip, these conversations present a vernacular rendition of Nanjing as a lived space. Widely circulated through a booming publishing industry and avidly consumed by the rapidly growing reading public, these well-received texts and images powerfully reshaped the popular imagination of Nanjing.

Although probably not deliberately, the actions and imagination of Nanjing residents in effect called into question the institutional prescription and cultural interpretation of urban space. How to determine if urban space was taxable or its boundary wallable? Given the changing role and function of the city, how should the heterogeneity of urban space be construed through images and texts? Although these challenges and responses studied in this book bear the distinct signature of the particular environment of Nanjing, in the final analysis they were driven by the transformations occurring in the Ming empire. By examining the institutional and cultural conjunctions at the heart of the Nanjing cases, this book hopes to uncover a new dimension of late Ming development, one deeply rooted in the mid-dynastic commercial boom and yet centered on cities.

AN UNTOLD STORY OF LATE MING PROSPERITY

The Nanjing episodes took place at a remarkable moment in Chinese history marked by the advance of a monetarized economy supported by an influx of silver from Japan and the New World. It has been estimated that toward the end of China’s “silver century” (1550–1650) at least 250,000–265,000 kilograms of foreign specie were exchanged for Chinese goods each year. China had become a major participant in the...
global economy. Monetization prevailed in the rural economy as cash crops and market-oriented specialization became dominant. Urban and rural handicraft production continued to grow, as did the labor market. Eventually even the government fiscal system became monetized when labor conscription was commuted into silver payments. The triumph of the market economy left such a profound imprint on a wide array of social and cultural developments that it has become an obligatory preface to late imperial Chinese studies. With prosperity came expanded cultural horizons that liberated people from the rigorous hierarchies of gender and social order and created new opportunities to stake out domains of individual or corporate autonomy. This newfound freedom, in Jonathan Spence’s vivid phrase, epitomizes the “energies of Ming life.”

Contemporary elite observers, however, were much less enthusiastic about the rise in material wealth. The social energy unleashed by economic development profoundly challenged the prescribed social norms for an agrarian community. The clash between political and social forces created a fluid social scene, or the “floating world” in Dorothy Ko’s words:

Traditional social distinctions—between high and low, merchant and gentry, male and female, respectable and mean—were idealized constructs best suited for a self-sufficient agrarian society. By the sixteenth century, these binary oppositions seemed at odds with the complexity of human relationships in the highly commercialized region. The ideal Confucian norms, devised to instill social harmony by perpetuating hierarchies and distinctions, became more prescriptive than descriptive, although they were no less powerful because of that.

The erosion of cultural norms stirred deep anxieties among those less receptive to change. Grave concern over “corrupted social customs” was so prevalent that the general tone of contemporary social criticism and self-perception during this period was a strong sense of confusion. In some extreme cases, the frequent transgressions of boundaries in public and private life were considered an indication of a monumental crisis. Indeed, in comparison with similar social critiques in the Song and Qing dynasties, scholars find that late Ming exhibited a far deeper sense of anxiety over social disorder and cultural crisis—“the whole country has gone mad,” announced the editor of one gazetteer as he lamented that the reversal of social status had become the norm. In response to the fear of impending social and moral collapse, the late
Ming witnessed a surge in publications aimed at reversing social disorder and re-establishing the proper boundaries between superior and inferior and between men and women. Voluminous records and biographies of chaste women and filial sons were published and widely circulated.\(^9\) Manuals of genteel taste attempted to reclaim social distinction through the display of true refinement.\(^10\) Paradoxically these cultural artifacts facilitated emulation of scholarly and social elites while further deepening anxiety over blurred social boundaries.

Yet, at the same time, intensifying social mobility and interaction also prompted extraordinary developments previously unknown in Chinese history, such as the prominent role played by “public opinion” in public affairs and an eccentric cultural scene with a strong populist undertone. The most radical strain of late Ming Neo-Confucianism, for example, announced that dao resides in the common people’s everyday life and that sagehood is attainable by anyone regardless of social class or profession.\(^11\) These trends were further enhanced by a flourishing publishing industry, through which political posters and pamphlets were easily produced and circulated and vernacular novels became so influential that “fiction” was said to rival the three teachings (Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism).\(^12\)

The economic-social-cultural nexus of change that emerged from this period has marked the late Ming as an extraordinary chapter in Chinese history. This characterization of the late Ming moment—full of energetic, sometimes contradictory, changes—is at odds with an earlier view of the Ming as a downward turning point for Chinese civilization. Under this view, the drastic expansion of imperial autocracy under the Ming led to an inward-looking age of intellectual and technological stagnation in sharp contrast with “early modern” Europe spanning the Renaissance, the age of discovery, and the Reformation. With the surge of new literature in the field,\(^13\) scholars have begun to regard late Ming developments as symbolizing the “sprouts of capitalism”\(^14\) or as reflecting an indigenous early modernity in China.\(^15\) Ongoing debates over nomenclature notwithstanding, a revisionist scenario centered on commerce-driven challenges to the prescribed order of social hierarchy in late imperial times appears to have gained firm ground.

The four case studies examined in this book both confirm and challenge the silver-driven late Ming narrative. The social and cultural de-
velopments prompted by the commercial boom did indeed play a criti-
cal role in these events. The tax movement was part of the empire-wide
fiscal reform that converted all levies into silver payments, a movement
that attests to the relentless tide of the silver economy. The anti-city-
wall protest echoes the surge of social conflicts, protests, and uprisings
resulting from the disruptive effects of the market economy on the pre-
scribed social hierarchy. Similarly, the published images and discourses
about Nanjing are a product of the lively late Ming cultural industry.
The Nanjing tour guide—an example of the lifestyle guidebooks that
emerged during this period—embodies the intrusion of commercial
wealth into cultural life, as elites and their emulators sought guidance in
navigating the burgeoning consumer culture. At the same time, even as
greater social mobility created the need to reassert social distinction,
many literati began to look to the common people’s world for inspira-
tion. The newfound interest in popular culture was manifested in the
enthusiastic pursuits of novels and dramas based on current events, a
trend that led to the publishing of gossip in its most immediate form,
ketan, which featured juicy conversations in printed texts.

Closer examination shows, however, that the familiar elements in the
Nanjing cases also played out along unfamiliar lines: the grassroots tax
reform, in an effort to lessen the fiscal burden, strove to create, instead
of oppose, a new urban property tax; the popular protest against the
court’s demand that Gaochun wall itself was directed not only at the
onerous fiscal and physical impositions from the state but also at what
a city wall symbolized—the status of an official city normally associated
with power and prestige. In the other cases, current historiography
proves to be similarly insufficient. For example, the editor of Jinling
tuyong, immediately after its well-received first publication, published a
second edition that included dozens of additional poems as well as a
historical atlas of Nanjing city, an editorial move that deviated drasti-
cally from the book’s original format as a lifestyle manual for the aspir-
ing newly wealthy. Furthermore, compared to the singular focus of con-
temporary ketan on entertainment, the two Nanjing ketan studied
here appear to be more ambitious. They incorporate a significant
amount of discussion on urban administration and cultural explications
of the idea of “Nanjing.” In other words, although the narrative woven
around the commercial boom can account for the occurrence of these
popular actions and creation of cultural products, it falls short of explicating their unique agendas.

The unraveling of the Nanjing cases brings into focus the limitations of the narrative of the late Ming triumph of commercial powers. Closing this historiographic gap requires a separate treatment of urbanization and its impacts apart from the generalized sweep of commercialization. Therefore, instead of folding the Nanjing cases into the wholesale changes wrought by late Ming prosperity, I focus the analysis on the new challenges to the administration and conceptualization of urban space faced by an urbanizing rural empire. For example, the lack of urban land tax in effect prevented the late Ming fiscal reforms from being extended to urban inhabitants, and this drove the popular demands for taxes in Nanjing. Yet why was urban space—in its most mundane form of land and property—deemed not taxable by the early Ming state? What problems did this absence of taxation cause for urban administration and how did urban residents campaign for a tax reform when the existing fiscal system recognized no urban taxes? Moreover, in light of the persistent state demand that official urban space be demarcated by city walls, it is not surprising that the protest against city-wall construction in Gaochun would provoke debates among residents on the very nature of their space and a challenge to the state decision to promote their market town into a county seat. It brought to the fore the underlying tension between the official urban hierarchy and market towns, whose proliferation in the sixteenth century prompted a newfound sense of identity for town dwellers. How did this development affect the management of commercial and official city systems in the Ming empire?

By the same token, only by viewing the Nanjing images and texts as part of the shared cultural responses to an expanding urban society can we fully appreciate the rich messages embedded in them. In light of the rising importance of cultured sightseeing in major late Ming cities, the expanded edition of Jinling tuyong exemplifies the continuous efforts of native Nanjing elites to detach the imaginary of Nanjing from Hongwu’s grand vision and reanchor it to local landmarks. The unusually rich contents of Nanjing ketan, I will argue, reflect the growing interests and concerns of a new breed of urban elites toward their lived space as a result of the influx of rural gentry into cities. The questions to ask are:
Why did urban literati choose these particular formats to articulate their perceptions of urban life and what new conceptualization of urban space arose from these cultural works?

These questions are of central concern in this book. Taken together, they challenge the current view of urbanization as an automatic by-product of commercialization and the city as the site in which many of the silver-driven social and cultural developments materialized with higher frequency and greater density. Above all, the case studies of Nanjing indicate that the ramifications of urbanization cannot be reduced to the mere intensification of commercial influences. This distinction is particularly relevant to Ming China, an empire initially conceived and institutionalized around the ideal of self-governing rural communities. Because of urbanization, the growing number and increasing size of cities brought enhanced commercial efficiency, social mobility, and cultural interaction, all contrary to the expectations of the dynasty’s institutional infrastructure and ideological premises. The chasm between the original system and the emerging social reality became the source of widely felt discontent and confusion: How to re-invent the fiscal foundation for an urbanizing rural empire? How to effectively manage and balance the proliferation of commercial towns with the official walled cities? How to render the heterogeneity of urban space through images and texts when the function of the city could no longer be defined only in political/administrative terms? In the wake of the sixteenth-century boom, the Ming empire confronted a host of increasingly pressing “urban questions,” each requiring revision of the idea of the city.

Viewed from this perspective, the story threading through the four case studies of this book relates how Nanjing residents responded to and negotiated with these urban questions. The advantages of this approach is manifold. First, it allows us to consider urbanization as a willed process, in which local initiatives play a key role. The emphasis on the reactions of historical actors to their time further makes it clear that what we observe in Nanjing is both general and unique. General in that the developments in Nanjing were ultimately driven by urban questions as the Ming empire strove to cope with the ramifications of urbanization. Yet at the same time unique, as repeatedly demonstrated in the following chapters, the responses and reactions in Nanjing were
only part of a wide spectrum of possibilities created by urban residents at the time.* That is, Nanjing is representative not because other contemporary cities adopted the same courses of action but because the same challenges and demands similarly motivated urban residents elsewhere to respond and react, albeit in their own terms. The search for common ground, I believe, does not have to be confined to locating uniform patterns of behavior, for this assumption undervalues the innate creativity of human agency. What ties members of society together is not the replication of actions but the shared circumstances that prompt them to act in the first place—in this case, the problems facing cities. Finally, the focus on the interplay between micro-developments in Nanjing and the macro-transformation of the Ming empire foregrounds the fact that the nature of and responses to these urban questions are in many ways unique to the Ming dynasty, a finding that sheds new light on the nature of urbanization and urbanism in late imperial China.

A DYNASTY-CENTERED APPROACH

In highlighting the urban transformation of the late Ming empire, this book restores the concept of dynasty to the study of Chinese cities. This analytical framework calls attention to the impact of institutional infrastructure and shared cultural trends on the nature and consequences of urbanization in a centralized, rural empire. Such an approach is particularly relevant to the field of Chinese urban history since urbanization is rarely considered in the context of a particular dynasty.18 This tendency is curious in view of the rather disparate attitudes toward cities of the various dynasties of the past millennium. For instance, in contrast to the institutional centrality of rural communities in the early Ming system, cities served as the governing base for the ruling minorities (Mongols and Manchus) in the multiethnic colonial empires

*This is not to suggest that Nanjing’s developments are always one of a kind but, rather, to advocate a more nuanced and accurate case-by-case evaluation of Nanjing’s scenarios. In some cases (such as the creation of urban land tax in Chapter 1), Nanjing does represent the most typical solution—but by no means the solution—at the time. Such comparison also enables us to better identify the truly innovative in Nanjing (such as the significance of the populist measures in Ding Bin’s huojia reform, also discussed in Chapter 1).
of the Yuan and the Qing. And the state-driven economic activism practiced by the Song, like the Ming a Han-centered dynasty, resulted in a much more intensive urban taxation scheme than the Ming imposed. Despite these differences, however, little attention has been paid to studying and comparing how these factors affected urban developments in different dynasties.

This oversight is to a great extent rooted in the persistent pursuit of a China-centered urbanism (i.e., the particular form and dynamic of Chinese urban development). Interest in the idea of “the city” and its specific formulation in China can be traced to Max Weber’s studies in the early twentieth century. Grounded in his unique definition of “the city,” Weber’s thesis contended that the essence of Western modernity lay in its distinctive urban societies. Challenging the conventional definition of cities according to population density or the fulfillment of specific political or military functions, Weber maintained that only from the presence of autonomous urban communities could we ascertain the existence of cities—or, rather, the ideal type of cities. Under this criterion, imperial Chinese cities, dominated by particularistic social relations (attached to native villages) and the administrative needs of imperial governance, were deemed the antithesis of the occidental cities that had served as precursors to the modern era.

Provocative and polemical, Weber’s verdict on Chinese cities has been very influential in shaping the Problematik of the field. Weber’s longue durée perspective, which considered cities as a benchmark not for individual dynasties but for Chinese civilization as a whole, influenced even his most vehement opponents such as G. William Skinner. Countering Weber’s portrayal of Chinese cities as marginal to state power and irrelevant to historical development, Skinner’s thesis successfully reclaimed a place for cities in late imperial China and remapped the country around a nested urban hierarchy. Skinner’s model not only reformulated the spatial conceptualization of Chinese empires

*There appears to be no clear consensus among scholars on the use and connotations of the term “urbanism.” This book adopts a historicized view of urbanism, referring to a particular form and nature of urbanization at a specific time and space; see, e.g., “Baroque Urbanism” in Lees and Hohenberg, The Making of Urban Europe, pp. 137–78. In other words, although “urbanization” refers to quantitative changes in urban settlement, “urbanism” emphasizes the qualitative development of the process.
but also revolutionized the narrative of urban history, establishing a timeline of Chinese urbanism independent of dynastic chronology. In Skinner’s schema, Chinese cities underwent the most significant transformation rather early, between the tenth and thirteenth centuries. Before this change, Chinese cities were mainly administrative centers populated by officials and their families as primary consumers. During this time period, a shift in the primary role of Chinese cities from political to economic demolished the previously rigorous city planning that had created controlled marketplaces and segregated quarters. What emerged were major metropolises with as many as a million residents. The second important change occurred during the sixteenth-century commercial boom, when domestic commerce began to progress beyond interurban exchanges of luxury goods to intraregional markets for daily necessities such as grains and commercial crops. As a result, cities came to penetrate Chinese life at a much deeper level, playing central roles as nodes of commodity exchange, social interaction, and cultural exposure. Yet even though Skinner’s thesis successfully rescues Chinese cities from Weber’s Europe-centered teleology, it still measures the nature and changes of Chinese urbanism against the longue durée development of a market economy spanning several dynastic boundaries.

The influence of Skinner’s thesis could not be more profound. It refutes the essentialist characterization of “the city” in Chinese civilization by considering the development of urban space as an active and ongoing historical process. Demonstrating that market-driven urbanization indeed redefined the spatial order of imperial China, Skinner successfully destroyed Weber’s dichotomy between the Occidental and Oriental city. This insight allows scholars to re-evaluate the historical role of Chinese cities and revisit issues regarding the political and cultural ramifications of late imperial urbanization. First, embedded in a vast agrarian empire, did cities command the same level of cultural centrality in Chinese life as their European counterparts? In particular, can we identify a coherent and sustaining “urban tradition” in Chinese cultural practice? Second, essential to Weber’s characterization of the ideal type of city that served as the precursor of modernity is a self-identified urban community pressing for political rights from the monarchy. Were Chinese cities, buttressed by their commercial clout, able to develop a special power relationship with the imperial state?
In sharp contrast to Skinner’s optimism regarding continuous urban growth, scholars find that, despite the strong tides of market-driven urbanization, the increasing presence of cities in Chinese life in the past millennium did not formally factor into institutional and cultural practices. The conceptualization of urbanity was subject to an enduring rural-centered cultural paradigm, and urban autonomy took on a highly situational form outside state institutions. These findings lead to the inevitable conclusion that the nature and consequences of urbanization in a vast, centralized, agrarian empire such as China are so different from those in Europe that historians should acknowledge the Chinese case as a distinctive form of urbanism in its own right rather than a matter of deficiencies and flaws. However, although highlighting the particularity of Chinese urbanism, this formulation also inadvertently suggests that enduring cultural and institutional inertia toward the expanding urban realm was the norm prior to the advent of Western influence in the modern era. The pursuit of a China-centered urbanism has thus led the field to a conceptual impasse.

This dilemma, this book argues, derives from the fact that the seemingly continuous urban expansion was punctuated by a wide variety of “dynastic urbanisms.” Instead of being an automatic byproduct of longue durée commercialization, urbanization in late imperial China was a process shaped by institutional and cultural practices particular to each dynasty. This insight allows us to move beyond the dichotomy of Chinese- and European-style urbanism and focus on the specific terms of Chinese urbanism in each dynasty. Studying urbanism under a more nuanced time frame, however, is not just a matter of reorganizing historical sources; it requires a new methodology for approaching the cultural and political effects of late imperial urbanization. The following section reviews the development of these two lines of inquiry in the field so as to establish a proper analytical scheme for this book.

The Cultural Effects of Urbanization

The Urban-Rural Continuum Thesis. The centrality of cities in economic development—well established by Skinner—does not extend into the cultural realm. On the contrary, many scholars are convinced of the persistence of rural dominance over Chinese urban culture. This
view can be traced to Weber’s conjecture that, measured against European cities, Chinese cities exhibited a high degree of rural dependence that perpetuated “rural attitudes” and hindered the formation of an urban merchant class. With a much firmer command of Chinese culture, Frederick Mote reformulated Weber’s dim assessment into a unique rural-urban continuum that distinguished China from the world’s urban traditions. Mote’s thesis conceives a Chinese city as culturally and politically an “open institution” that displayed no distinct boundaries from the countryside in terms of administration, lifestyles, architecture, and the like.

Mote’s characterization of the urban-rural continuum, as indicated in the title “A Millennium of Chinese Urban History,” aims to offer a sweeping generalization of Chinese urbanism since the Tang-Song urban revolution. The signature of this urbanism, ironically, lies in its dependence on rural culture. Mote goes as far as to state that “the rural component of Chinese civilization was more or less uniform, and it extended everywhere that Chinese civilization penetrated. It, and not the cities, defined the Chinese way of life.” As a result, despite the continuous urbanization of late imperial China, the “urban” still failed to register in the political, social, and, above all, cultural realms. In Mote’s opinion, “there may have been a trend toward concentration of the elite in cities as places of domicile in the later imperial era, but it was at best a trend; throughout the traditional period in Chinese social history, the elite was widely diffused in space, and psychologically oriented toward as many rural ties as urban ones.” In other words, despite the increasing concentration of elite residents and cultural and economic resources in Ming-Qing cities, the urban-rural continuum prevailed in the Chinese psyche and prevented the development of a distinct urban tradition in imperial China.

The Urban-Rural Continuum Revisited. Since the appearance of Mote’s thesis in the 1970s, the academic landscape has undergone drastic changes. Above all, the great cultural divide described by Mote has been shrunk considerably from both sides by new scholarship. The European urban-rural dichotomy cited by Mote has been much modified by revisionist studies that emphasize the interconnectedness of cities and countryside in the early modern era. At the same time, the
many social and cultural studies on Ming and Qing cities have also demonstrated that the “urban concentration” in late imperial times involved not just quantitative congregations of people and resources but also significant alterations in the fabric of life. For example, contrary to Mote’s claim, new studies on material culture and urban consumption have forcefully established the importance of cities in creating fashions and consumption patterns at the time. Most prominent was the city of Suzhou. Under its sway, the term *Suyang* 蘇樣 (Suzhou style) became synonymous with taste and fashion in contemporary minds. The rising importance of urban consumption lent additional cultural valence to taste as a form of status distinction and ultimately prompted radical thinkers to advocate spending on luxuries as a spur to overall economic development.31

The new role of cities as centers for commercial activity and cultural consumption attracted a broad spectrum of visitors seeking career opportunities or simply entertainment. The influx of sojourners gave rise to an increasingly active social scene in major cities in the empire. Public spaces such as urban gardens, teahouses, temples, and courtesan salons provided physical grounds for heightened social interactions through which new ties were developed outside traditional kinship or native-place affiliations. For the well-educated, the abundant opportunities for networking and cultural activities in cities even created alternative careers outside the prescribed path to officialdom through the civil service examinations. Even the less cultivated became increasingly connected through a shared world of print news and gossip, the circulation of which was greatly enhanced by the flourishing printing industry.32 The informed and oftentimes politicized urban mass formed the social base for the growing frequency and scale of collective action in Ming and Qing cities, which ranged from food riots, protests against fiscal policies, wage disputes, and strikes to open opposition against the tenure of controversial local officials.33 Although formally granted political rights were still far off, the opinions and actions of the urban public began to play a visible role in contemporary politics.

In many ways, although cities were not official administrative units, they indeed developed into de facto social and political entities operating on very different principles from the countryside. The unique social structure of cities provoked administrative concerns that were distinctly
urban in nature and required solutions different from those used for rural problems. The uniqueness of “urban” issues was clearly recognized by contemporary elites. As more and more gentry moved into nearby towns and cities and became absentee landlords, they began to play an active role in urban affairs. In many case studies, scholars are repeatedly struck by the “specific preoccupation of both urban elites and urban administrators with urban problems, both groups being completely accustomed to assuming the discreteness of the municipal unit as a locus of managerial responsibilities.” In other words, the institutionally perpetuated rural bias was not as inhibitive of political awareness among urbanites as Mote thought.

_Urban Identity Vs. Urban-Rural Distinction._ The new findings in the field, interestingly, have not rendered Mote’s thesis obsolete but prompted an updated revision from a very different branch of scholarship, one that combines archival work and anthropological field research. This approach has proved fruitful in understanding popular perception of the swift commercialization and urbanization that in so many respects remolded the lives and livelihood of Chinese people. Drawing together works by scholars from Europe, the United States, and China, the edited volume _Town and Country in China: Identity and Perception_ renews Mote’s thesis from the perspective of popular religions by extending the concept of the urban-rural continuum from architectural styles and elite aesthetics to ritual performance. The editors contend that urban-rural distinctions did not become a significant part of an individual’s identity in China until the twentieth century when “political reforms separated cities and towns as agents of social change, [and] an ideology emerge[d] that looked upon villages as the source of backwardness.” The urban-rural distinction was so external to traditional Chinese thought that “the search for the urban tradition within traditional China ends in anachronism.” Fully aware of the commercial developments in late imperial times that rendered cities a distinct realm for social practices, scholars in this volume find it necessary to distinguish between social history and cultural paradigm. That is, the apparent urban-rural differentiation in social reality had no recognizable impact on Chinese identity. What dominated Chinese people’s view of their lived space, argue the editors, was an all-pervasive paradigm, de-
fined by the administrative structure of the bureaucracy, that denied the distinction between urban and rural areas.

The dominance of a state-centered view of space, however, does not necessarily imply the triumph of the suppressive power of the state. On the contrary, by adopting the language of the state, David Faure argues, township leaders were able to keep power in local hands. Yet also because of this, the growing importance of market towns did not give rise to an ideology highlighting town-country differentiation. In addition to the functionalist explanation, Henrietta Harrison suggests that we should consider the seemingly curious obliviousness to the urban-rural distinction in the larger context of boundary-making. In her case study of Taiyuan (Shanxi), she finds that the urban-rural distinction generated by social and economic developments paled in comparison to other territorial divisions (i.e., the urban-rural division was subordinated to the differences between Taiyuan and other counties or between mountain and plain areas in Taiyuan). The obscured sense of urban-rural division, in other words, arose from the fact that the communal boundaries generated by religious practices substantially crosscut marketing and administrative hierarchies, resulting in a society in which “political, marketing, and religious centers could all have social characteristics which we would define as urban, but the clear differentiation between the different types of hierarchies meant that they were not perceived as such.” Contrary to Mote’s argumentation, Harrison argues that it was not the lack of an urban-rural distinction but rather an overabundance of such divisions that constituted the urban-rural continuum in traditional China.

These expositions of the obscuring of urban identity in late imperial China, albeit compelling, do not inherently exclude any form of cultural articulation of urban sentiments or experiences. It is curious, then, that the editors of this volume argue for the incompatibility of an urban-rural distinction and traditional Chinese thought. As the title of the volume rightly suggests, “identity” and “perception” are two related and yet separate components of Mote’s urban-rural continuum thesis. To be sure, identities in China often manifest themselves through a matrix of competition, and there might well be a hierarchy of spatial identities in place in which, for strategic or ideological reasons, the urban-rural division was not a dominant factor. Yet it is quite a different matter
to claim a collective apathy toward the urban—to insist that a rural-centered cultural paradigm (for Mote, it is part of a national psyche) consistently prevented the perception and articulation of urbanity in an age of rapid urbanization. To better distinguish the two, we need to take a close look at the substance of this proposed cultural paradigm. Similar to Mote’s emphasis on the rural lifestyle and pastoral aesthetic found in Nanjing or Suzhou, David Faure and Taotao Liu contend that despite the seemingly distinct appearance of great administrative cities, “when one searches in towns and villages for the rural tradition, one finds very much the same beliefs and customs as in the administrative cities.” In other words, the most tangible evidence for this paradigm lies in the unity of cultural performance across the urban-rural continuum.

However, this cultural unity proves superficial and deceptive—not only for historians but also for contemporaries as well. Although the idealization of rural life remained a recurring theme in literary painting and literature in the late Ming, a well-developed urban-based elite community added a new twist to the rhetorical yearning for rural life. As one Nanjing luminary, Gu Qiyuan, observed, urban glamour had evidently prevailed on his peers. Many reconciled this conflict between the draw of the metropolis and their bucolic yearnings by building a garden in their grand urban mansions as a gesture toward the rural ideal (as Gu himself did). Even the so-called shanren 山人 (mountain inhabitants), who flaunted a reputation as lofty rural eremites, used their rural residences as facades to mask frequent trips into town. The novel Tale of Marriage Destinies 醒世姻緣傳 is another case in point. It portrays the fall of a utopian self-contained agricultural community, Mingshui, as it develops into a market town and becomes engulfed by material indulgence and moral decadence. Daria Berg, however, finds that beneath the didactic lamentations over the fall of Mingshui lie rather mixed emotions. The spectacle of human depravity also provides a way to escape the lethargic boredom of the rural utopia. Although the rural idyll still retained its utopian lure, late Ming literati found themselves increasingly entangled in city life and torn between escapism and an addiction to the cosmopolitan world.

These examples foreground the importance of reading cultural texts and images against contemporary social praxis. One telling example is the development of the genre of yongjing 詠景 (textual and visual appre-
A New Approach to Chinese Urbanism

which had developed into a prominent representational mode in late imperial times. *Yongjing* distill a place into a series of scenic snapshots—jing 景 (prospects). Dictated by literati aesthetics that idealized a bucolic lifestyle, jing almost always are pastoral. Just as the urban-rural continuum thesis predicts, the production of jing largely failed to register cityscapes and urban glamour of even major cities. Despite the weight of tradition, however, details of bustling city life still found their way into jing representations. For example, *Hainei qiguan* 海內奇觀 (Fantastic spectacles within the realm), a collection of empire-wide tourist attractions published in 1609, includes one urban scene depicting the night market in Beiguan, a busy marketplace in Hangzhou. More significantly, the appreciation of scenic sites, when conducted in cities, became a practice that created solidarity among urban elites, a development first brought to light by Tobie Meyer-Fong’s study of Yangzhou. Through her vivid portrayal of this major port city in the late seventeenth century, we learn that Yangzhou, in the wake of a highly disruptive dynastic transition, became a popular venue for leisure touring and social gatherings. The reconstruction and celebration of the city’s famous sites allowed its elite sightseers—men of divergent political allegiances—to present themselves as members of a single class of urban elites. What Meyer-Fong observes in early Qing Yangzhou is in fact the continuation of a late Ming development—touring as a means for urban literati to form social ties. What appears to be a rural-centered aesthetic was appropriated as a constituent element in the formation of urban society.

By the same token, the lack of definitive architectural differentiation between the city and the countryside does not necessarily imply no differentiation between urban and rural spaces. For instance, recent studies such as Yinong Xu’s work on Suzhou demonstrates that although the seemingly indistinguishable appearances of flat buildings and courtyards constitute the basic units of Chinese built environments, ostensibly similar spaces could still be appropriated for different functions. The most telling example can be found in the Xuanmiao Guan (a Daoist temple) complex at the center of Suzhou city, which served as a site for worship, association meetings, business, entertainment, and other aspects of social life. The versatility of a single site was realized not through formal prescription but through social practice.
Indeed, these new studies effectively contest the efficacy of an all-powerful cultural paradigm that refused to grant urban space formal recognition by embedding it in a rural-dominated cultural unity. As this review has proposed, with an influx of human and material resources, qualitative changes arose in perceiving the “city” as a political, social, and, above all, conceptual entity distinct from the countryside. What misleads us is that these changes were registered in a cultural language shared across the urban-rural divide. The seeming uniformity in architectural styles or art genres such as *yongjing*, when applied in the urban environment, could also serve as effective vehicles for the articulation of urbanity. In other words, instead of creating a separate urban cultural tradition, urbanites appropriated the shared cultural language to express their spatial experiences. It is thus the underlying social practices, not the formats used to embody them, that dictate the meaning of urbanites’ cultural expressions. To fully appreciate the messages conveyed in city images and urban literature, as demonstrated in the second half of this book, we need to take into account the social activities that led to their creation. This approach, moreover, allows us to see that the articulation of urbanity was far from an exercise in philosophical abstraction. Through the reinventing of existing literary genres and cultural practices, new social ties were formed and a sense of society articulated.

*The Political Effects of Urbanization*

*The Issue of Urban Autonomy.* A second line of post-Weberian scholarship focuses on the formation of urban communities and their power relationship to the imperial state. The most important work on urban autonomy is William Rowe’s two-volume work on Hankow, which traces the development of the city between 1796 and 1895. Rowe found a surge of urban institution-building efforts in Hankow during the nineteenth century as merchants assumed increasing responsibilities in public affairs and achieved more and more latitude to regulate their own economic activities. The growth in number, functional range, and systemic linkage of these institutions amounted to the popularization of local governance. Moreover, this spontaneous and intense participation in public life facilitated a sense of solidarity and an impe-
This development, Rowe argues, attests to the emergence of an autonomous urban community indigenous to traditional China. This finding powerfully refutes Weber’s dichotomy between Occidental and Oriental cities, placing China back on the map of global modernity. In Rowe’s view, an indigenous form of early modernity emerged in China between the increase in long-distance trade in the late sixteenth century and the advent of factory-based industry in the last decade of the nineteenth century. During this time period, many Chinese cities “shared a sufficient number of basic features with their Western counterparts to justify [viewing] the two as comparable social units.”

Hankow, for example, exhibits the main traits of early modern European cities such as “the steady development of organized, corporate-style civic action and the proliferation of a wide range of philanthropic and public service institutions.” The conscious process of urban institution building in Hankow yielded increasingly formalized autonomous groups and organizations, ranging from guild federations to benevolent halls to fire brigade networks to local defense militia. Rowe argues that the advent of these community groups marked the emergence of a “public sphere” in late imperial China, a monumental development despite its unfortunate demise in the twentieth century.

The appearance of Rowe’s claim of a public sphere in the wake of the 1989 Beijing Tian’anmen Square massacre provoked great interest and controversy in the China field. The scholars who participated in this debate came from various disciplines, and the periods investigated ranged from the early seventeenth century to contemporary China. Although observers generally agree that corporate groups and voluntary associations were plentiful in premodern China and that public participation was an essential element of late imperial Chinese urban life, there appears to be no consensus whether such affiliations can be identified as signs of a public sphere in late imperial China.

In particular, central to the public-sphere debate is an assumed antithesis between autonomy and collaboration and between state and society. After all, how autonomous could Hankow elites be if the privileges they enjoyed depended largely on official patronage? The insistent presence of the state in the elite managerial public sphere is observable in many other areas, such as community granaries and...
From Public Sphere to Public Space. In brief, these revisionist efforts reflect the emerging view in the field that the energetic public life of late imperial cities was undergirded by a persistent state presence whose power and authority were never formally conceded to social groups but which could in practice be negotiated and appropriated. They call for a new conceptual protocol that acknowledges such ambiguity while still retaining analytical efficacy. A new trend in the field is to move away from fixed conceptual constructs such as “public sphere” toward a greater focus on the actual operations of urban “public spaces.” Two new studies on Beijing exemplify this development.

The first work is Susan Naquin’s *Peking: Temples and City Life, 1400–1900*. As Philip Kuhn aptly points out in a review, what Naquin demonstrates in this detailed study of urban life in Beijing is that “the public
had ‘spaces’ but no ‘sphere.’” The word “temples” in this work is defined broadly to include other urban institutions such as guildhalls and native-place lodges that often conducted their own ritual observances. Naquin establishes the connection between temple spaces and the mosaic-like social landscape of Beijing (composed of sojourning compatriots, ritual associations, occupational groups, foreign ethnics, and the like) by showing that urban public spaces accrued different meanings through social practice. For example, during the Qing, of the Beijing temples patronized by the Ming court, at least 34 served as sites for festivals, 22 for charitable activities (official or nonofficial), 12 for markets, 10 for pilgrimages, 89 for popular tourist attractions, and at least 7 for informal political organizing. One third of them later acquired private sponsors, including merchants, religious associations, or ordinary people. The versatility of these sites allowed them to serve as the “focus for community-building and identity-defining activities. . . . Their relative autonomy from family or state control was reflected in—indeed in important ways constituted through—use of this space.” The latitude Beijing urbanites enjoyed in their appropriation of public spaces was never formally granted; rather, it was acquired via political negotiation and social practice. For the most part, negotiation was accomplished through informal ties to the state; social practice simply added another layer of activity to temple spaces by using them as marketplaces and entertainment sites.

Such liberty in appropriating public spaces does not imply a public sphere independent of the state. The prescriptive boundaries between state and urban society were too ambiguous and unstable for us to reach a conceptual conclusion. Instead, Naquin suggests, “The formal precariousness of these organizations, the participation of people who were part of the state structure, and the absence of language of independence or opposition makes teleological comparisons with a later and ostensibly autonomous European ‘public sphere’ dangerous and probably inappropriate.” Still, it is clear that even without formal official sanction, the public spaces that played a crucial role in urban life could be appropriated through political negotiation and social practice. In other words, in clear recognition that Chinese cities did not enjoy institutionally sanctioned legal rights, scholars are looking for a more nuanced and situational approach to untangle the complicated issue of
urban autonomy. Richard Belsky’s work on native-place lodges in Ming and Qing Beijing is a case in point. Moving beyond the debate on the communal or particularistic nature of native-place lodges, he shifts the focus to the area hosting these native-place lodges and examines it as a public space mediating the political center and localities. Belsky finds that this particular public space served different functions at various junctures in history and its political influence peaked during the late nineteenth-century reform era. What emerges from these studies is a vision of a much more fluid relation between the state and cities, contingent on the particular public space carved out by individual groups and associations at different moments and places.

During the long journey since Weber first put forth his characterization of Chinese cities, historians have come to see that, despite the lack of well-established legal boundaries, we can still locate urban autonomy and agency in imperial cities, even if they took on highly situational and amorphous forms. However, although this localized approach provides a historically grounded concept of power and social agency, by relegating urban autonomy to informal arrangements and institutional ambiguities, it ironically perpetuates the Weberian argument that the Chinese imperial state was so bound by its rural base that political changes in cities could be made only outside state institutions. After all, the fact that the state did not grant formal legal status to the city does not necessarily preclude institutional adjustments to accommodate the growing presence of cities in the empire. The first half of this book, therefore, hopes to demonstrate that the demands of governing an increasingly urbanized society indeed prompted institutional reformulation of urban space. That is, while following the argument of China historians that urban autonomy does not reside in formal independence from state authority but rather in the negotiations between state agencies and urban residents, this investigation will take the further step of looking into how local initiatives prevailed at the institutional level.

**URBANIZATION IN A RURAL EMPIRE: OVERVIEW AND ORGANIZATION**

The preceding review has positioned the argument of this book in relation to the main approaches to late imperial urbanization. Either inspired by Weber or motivated to prove him wrong, scholars have
made significant headway in uncovering the side of Chinese urbanism that eluded Weber's attention: one that features a continuously expanding urban realm emerging on the economic, cultural, and political landscapes. As historians move away from Weber, it becomes clear that cities should not be reified as an index for Chinese civilization. As such, the significance of urbanization can be measured only through the particular ways by which cities registered in Chinese society. In this direction, Skinner's model explicates how late imperial urbanization spawned a market-driven spatial hierarchy that fundamentally restructured economic activities. In contrast, our understanding of the effects of urbanization on Chinese cultural and political life is much less clear.

On one hand, in light of the complex ties between cities and the countryside in an agrarian empire such as China, Mote's “urban-rural continuum” thesis contended that, despite urbanization, the supremacy of rural culture prevented a well-defined perception of the “urban” from taking shape. As this review has made clear, however, the preponderant attention to the countryside, even in the extreme case of the Ming, did not prohibit the emergence of cultural practices expressing sentiments and needs unique to urban environments; it was only that they were registered through the same cultural vocabularies across the urban-rural division. Thus, the questions this book asks are: How did urbanites reinvent existing cultural forms to articulate their spatial experiences? What was the conceptualization of urbanity that emerged from such cultural practices?

On the other hand, the central issue regarding the political ramifications of urban growth also remains unresolved: Did cities develop a new power relationship with the state? The debates on public sphere and civic society have made clear that China did not develop institutionally sanctioned spaces for cities. New studies have found the distinctive social composition and functions of cities indeed prompted urban residents to seek compromises and strike bargains with the government over the use of their lived spaces. Thus, the interaction between the imperial state and urban society is best characterized as continuous negotiation in response to the changing nature and needs of urban society. This book takes this view a step further, arguing that such social initiatives did not stop at informal arrangements such as the
appropriation of public spaces but in fact forced changes and adjustments at the institutional level.

Taken together, the two main lines of analysis in this book foreground the singular importance of social praxis in negotiating the meaning of urban space. The goal of such praxis, most important, was not to create novel developments of urban autonomy or a well-defined urban tradition as prescribed by Weber or Mote, but to effect changes in the idea of the city through existing institutional and cultural schemes. Furthermore, this process appears to have progressed under a different time frame than the conventional view of longue durée urbanization. Under the influence of Skinner’s periodization of Chinese urbanization, studies on late imperial cities tend to view urban development between the Song and the Qing as continuous—only with qualitative vicissitudes according to economic conditions. However, the development observable in Ming Nanjing argues that the nature and consequences of urban growth cannot be measured only by the expansion of commercial capacity; rather, institutional and cultural adjustments also need to be taken into account. A full appreciation of late Ming urbanization, as this book demonstrates, requires a dynasty-centered approach, since its particular course of development was fundamentally shaped by a host of institutional and cultural preconceptions established at the very inception of the Ming dynasty.

The dynasty-centered view, finally, shifts the analytical center of the book from the polarity between the state and society. Instead, the discussion focuses on the tension between the early Ming rural ideal and late Ming urban development and the resultant urban questions that compels both the society and the state to respond and adjust with available institutional and cultural resources. This process, in turn, helped define the specific terms and characteristics of late Ming urbanism—a unique feature that I revisit and develop further in the Conclusion.

To unravel the process of re-envisioning the late Ming against the early Ming vision of cities, nevertheless, is a more complicated task than it appears. The enduring influence of the founding emperor, Zhu Yuanzhang, in shaping the trajectory of the Ming empire has attracted great scholarly attention. Yet most studies have focused on his policy of self-sustained agrarian communities, which formed the basis of the last native empire in Chinese history. Indeed, other than Zhu’s distrust of
urban residents and his well-known apprehension concerning the social value of their means of livelihood, the “Ming constitution” instituted by Zhu betrays little of his urban vision. To uncover the urban plan of the Ming empire, we must substitute artifacts for texts. In the absence of urban policies in court directives and official memorials, Nanjing, the capital city Zhu Yuanzhang built for his empire, becomes the best available source.

In this light, Nanjing, in addition to its rich visual and textual materials, offers a precious vantage point for us to study the characteristics of Ming urbanism. Guided by the action and imagination of Nanjing-ness, the chapters that follow explore the continuous negotiation over the institutional (Chapters 1 and 2) and the conceptual (Chapters 3 and 4) constitution of urban space engaged in by both the state and the society. In brief, Chapter 1 looks closely at the Nanjing tax reform, examining how challenges to the administration of urban space during the late Ming fiscal reforms brought the residents together in the same cause. Chapter 2 expands the focus to the Nanjing Metropolitan Area, studying the management of city systems under the jurisdiction of Nanjing. Chapter 3 approaches the issue of “imagined Nanjing” through the production and social uses of city images, especially the ways in which Nanjing elites countered the state-imposed vision of their city by producing manuals advocating their own ways of looking at Nanjing. Finally, Chapter 4 directly confronts the idea of the “city” by exploring the conceptual ties between urbanites and the space they inhabited through a close reading of two early seventeenth-century ketan, collections of recorded conversations among urban elites about the city that they inhabited.

The analysis throughout the book is dictated by the constant interplay between the microcosm of Nanjing and the underlying macro-developments as the empire strove to cope with the ramifications of urbanization. The dialectic between the micro and the macro allows us to keep sight of the agency of historical subjects in shaping the course of their own history while exploring general trends in the Ming empire that made their innovations possible. The Conclusion draws on the macro-trends emerging from the four chapters and develops a more historically grounded approach to cities and urbanism in late imperial China.